

“Transfigurative Ecclesiology
and Other Thoughts On *Being Church*”

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Your Session has begun a sixth month series of conversations about our vision. We began our conversation with a short prayer. Then we spent the next 85-minutes looking at some demographics. What might our budget look like in five years? In ten? Many churches in the West are gradually losing members. Fewer people affiliate with any house of worship. What are we to do?

This was not the best place to begin a six-month conversation about our church’s vision. And the reason we began there is because our leader is not some high-powered consultant. Our leader in these talks is...me. I started us out on the wrong foot.

A better place to begin would have been to ask, *What is the church of Jesus Christ? Who is the church called to be? What is the church called to do?*

This sermon is an attempt to make up for that rocky start.

So, what is the church of Jesus Christ?

Who is the church called to be?

What is the church called to do?

As we ponder questions like these, I think it is wise for us to turn first to scripture. What does scripture lead you to believe about the church’s identity and purpose?

Allow me to jog through the scriptures that help me pull those questions into proper focus. (Your homework today is to ask yourself, “What passages of scripture are essential for YOU as you think about what the church is?” “What bible stories do you turn to in order to give you purpose and meaning?”

Here are some of the scriptures that come to my mind.

First, we Christians are followers of Jesus, who we believe to be the God's anointed Messiah (Hebrew), the Christ (Greek). So, I begin with Mary and Joseph. We read in the gospels of Matthew and Luke how they were faithful to welcome the birth of Jesus.

Jesus is the reason for the season, and Jesus is the reason for the church. Angels sang. Shepherds investigated. Wisemen sought him out. The political and religious powers were threatened.

My understanding of the church Jesus Christ begins with Jesus Christ, with incarnation. God came to us. God, in Christ, was one of us. My understanding of the church follows Jesus closely.

- He was born in humble beginnings.
- We look to his genealogy and see that Jesus comes from ordinary and extraordinary people, from Gentiles and famous Jews, from patriarchs and a prostitute.
- He was immediately a refugee running for his life.
- He was a 12-year-old in the temple teaching his elders (which suggests he had good religious education).
- He was baptized.
- In his ministry he often sought those the rest of us would leave out: the lepers, women, children, the powerless, the mentally ill, the outcast. (What does this say about the church's mission?)
- Jesus welcomed others.
- Jesus served others.
- He preached about love. (Consider the sermon on the mount.)
- He lived love. (He washed his friends' feet)
- Jesus called ordinary people to be his 12 disciples (fishermen, a tax collector)
- He talked about giving our whole selves (consider the story of the widow's coin).
- He was faithful to God even to the point of dying on a cross.
- He rose again.

If we, the church, want to know who we are called to be, we need to pay close attention to who we are called to follow. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

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Central to the church is a "theology of abundance."

The way I began our Session's discussion about our vision was from the standpoint of a theology of scarcity. How are we going to be able to pay for ministry in the next generation if our growth rate doesn't match or excel our rate of attrition?

This may be an appropriate line of inquiry for a financial planner. It is not appropriate for a minister of the Gospel. Why, because the church understands the "theology of abundance." The psalmist doesn't say his cup is half empty, or half full. No, the Psalmist says "My cup runneth over." (Psalm 23).

We look at how God in Scripture has always helped, delivered, redeemed, and sustained God's people. This is how we arrive at a theology of abundance.

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Central to the church is an understanding that God is with us. A name for Jesus is "Emmanuel," which, in Hebrew, means God-with-us. Our theologians would say that God is omniscient and omnipresent.

Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned. (John 14)

Jesus says, "For where two or three **are gathered in my name**, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20).

Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age." (Matthew 28).

The psalmist asks, where can I hide or flee from God's presence? No where. (Psalm 139).

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God loves us. Martin Luther said the Gospel in miniature is John 3:16: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

This is pure grace. We don't deserve it. We can't earn it.

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Our response to this grace is worship and praise:

Psalm 150

Praise the Lord! Praise God in the sanctuary;
praise God in God's mighty firmament
² Praise God for God's mighty deeds;
praise God according to God's surpassing greatness!
³ Praise God with trumpet sound;
praise God with lute and harp!
⁴ Praise God with tambourine and dance;
praise God with strings and pipe!
⁵ Praise God with clanging cymbals;
praise God with loud clashing cymbals!
⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

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Our response to God's grace is service.

After Jesus healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law, she got up and served others.

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When we pay attention to Jesus, we see that he identified himself to be of the lineage of prophets. **Jesus stands up for justice and love.** Paul reads Jesus' life and is led to say this about Jesus' work and our calling: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12).

It is from Micah that Jesus got his walk: "What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8).

It is from Moses that Jesus got his focus: "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all you soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise." (Duet 6:4)

Love with Justice. This is what Jesus taught and lived. Love God. Love neighbor as self.

Paul would say that there are many spiritual gifts, and all spiritual gifts are to be used for the good of the community. The greatest gift is Love. (I Cor 13)

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We look to scripture to see what the church is called to be and to do.

- The story of the Good Samaritan teaches about loving the stranger.
- The story of the prodigal son teaches about welcoming the lost home.
- The Joseph cycle of stories demonstrates how God is always working God's purposes out.
- The story of creation reminds us creation is good, we are called to be good stewards, and we are created in God's image.
- The book of Revelation reminds us that God wins!
- The book of Ruth reminds us that God's kingdom include outsiders to the inner circle.

What stories am I forgetting? What would you add?

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Do you remember today's sermon title? "Transfigurative Ecclesiology and Other Thoughts On *Being Church*." Ecclesiology has to do with the body of knowledge and the words we use to talk about the "congregation" or the "church." We get our best ideas of "church" from scripture.

The story from Mark's gospel today is the story of "Transfiguration." If the disciples didn't think Jesus was special before this trek up the mountain, they sure did when they got to the top. Jesus becomes transfigured right before their eyes. Moses and Elijah show up. Jesus, these disciples learn, is one of the heavy-hitters of the bible.

But we learn something very important about the church in this scene. Remember, Peter suggests they put up tents and live on that mountain. Why come down? Let's bask in the glory here.

Jesus said no. They had work to do. They had to come down that mountain and keep sharing the good news. Their place wasn't on retreat, their place was on the job.

And so, we are called from the glory of worship, to the ministry of service. We are called out from the sanctuary into the world. We are called to take our friendship to our neighbors down in the valley.

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What is the church?

Who are we called to be?

Where are we called to go?

The church is the body of Jesus Christ. We believe God calls and equips all people. God multiplies our efforts as he did the loaves and fishes. We espouse a mustard seed theology—where God can transform small efforts into big things. We believe we aren't alone. We believe we're called to love with justice. We believe God helps us. We believe God cares about faithfulness (and being "faithful" is often very, very different than what the world often calls "successful.")

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We, the church, would do well to hold tightly to scripture. Janice Harrington, a poet here in Champaign, suggests we hold scripture tightly, like the mother in her poem "Revival" who holds the bible tightly, like an ax handle. She also suggests that being faithful always leads us home; I never feel closer to home than when I'm with you, the church. Alleluia.

Let me end with a poem by Janice N. Harrington.

REVIVAL

Through the cooling dark,
they walk, Lillian, Webster, Riley, Anna,
MacArthur and Eurel, returning
from Heavenly Father and Yes, Jesus!,
from paper fans with little brown
girls in Sunday bonnets "M-hmmmm"
from the communion of sour juice and crackers,
ah weh-lll, from church mothers in nurses'

uniforms and rills of sweat spilling from black brows.
Have mercy on us, Father.
Look down upon us, Father, and give us
your blessing, in Jesus' name . . .

Above a darkened bough, a wing
beats, and in the pitchy shadows crickets
shrill, and a frog repeats, repeats,
repeats. Maybe Anna holds her father's
hand. Maybe the boys tussle and pitch
stones into darkness while their mother
watches, humming and holding
her Bible more firmly than an ax handle,
or maybe they go weary on and quiet.
It is only their steps you hear, only shifting sand.

On a rural route, a family walks
while the night begins its long sermon,
and the miles go by, and the miles go by.
If an owl calls from that darkness,
then someone will die. If a hound keens
one long, longing vowel, they will shudder.
If a star plummets, that too will have meaning.
This is faith, the road that takes them home.

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Let us pray:

God, you print the name of Christ upon the spirit.
You lead the walk through hills and ocean sand
You will each one of us a heritage of riches
You hold all life inside a healing hand.

Help us to BE your church.
Equip us to follow,
to live into our high calling.
Guide our earnest steps and
catch us in our falling,

AMEN.

Mark 9:2-9 ²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Affirmation of Faith/**The 23rd Psalm**

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.